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SUBJECT: ASAD: HOW DO WE TURN THIS AROUND?

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Gene A. Cretz
(Releasable to Former NEA A/S Richard Murphy)

¶1. (C) Summary. During a 90-minute one-on-one meeting on November 30, Syrian President Asad asked former NEA A/S Richard Murphy for advice on what could be done to improve US-Syrian relations and how Asad could expand his contacts with US media. (Asad had just completed his interview with the NY Times Neil McFarquhar, published December 1). Murphy urged Asad to publicly support Iraqi stability and efforts to move the peace process forward. Asad acknowledged that Syria shared the US goal of a stable and prosperous Iraq and America's goal of returning full sovereignty to Iraq as soon as possible. He expressed doubts about US resolve to pursue the Road Map in an election year. Murphy also urged that the SARG resolve the Murad child abduction case. End summary.

¶2. (C) Former NEA Assistant Secretary Richard Murphy visited Damascus November 29-December 1 as part of a regional visit that will also include Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE. This message conveys Ambassador Murphy's report to the Charge and Pol/C on his one-on-one meeting with Syrian President Asad on November 30. Septels report Murphy's meeting with FM Shara, and a separate meeting with the new Syrian Prime Minister, Naji Al-Utri, which the Charge also attended.

¶3. (C) REACHING US AUDIENCES: Having just finished an interview with the New York Times (published December 1), Asad asked for advice on expanding his contacts with the US media. He seemed pleased with the NY Times' interview, but noted that the paper reached only "the elites." What were other vehicles? Asad had considered granting CNN's Christiane Amanpour's request for an interview, but felt she was not widely watched in the US. His next interview would be with ABC's Peter Jennings, which he thought would reach a wider audience. How should he contact other journalists? Should he do his interviews in English? Should he do a human interest story? Murphy advised using Syrian Charge Imad Mustafa to contact the US press for as many interviews as he could, and that they be conducted in English as much as possible. Discussing his family and personal interests was a good idea; the late King Hussein had built goodwill in the US and Israel through such outreach.

¶4. (C) BILATERAL RELATIONS: Asad appeared concerned about the deterioration in relations with the US: what can we do about it? Murphy observed that while Syria had long been unpopular in Washington circles and with US public opinion, the frustration and irritation that had characterized relations had turned to anger over Syria's shipment of dual-use items and facilitation of volunteer fighters to Iraq. Asad said these activities had stopped, and maintained Syria was now trying to cooperate. Murphy said he understood that Syria was doing relatively well with controlling its border and there had been some cooperation over the Iraqi assets issue. He asked Asad whether he thought the US and Syria had a common interest in a stable and prosperous Iraq. Yes, Asad replied. Did Syria agree that the Coalition ought to transfer authority to an Iraqi government as soon as possible? Asad responded that this was indeed Syria's position. If this was the case, Murphy advised, then Syria needed to say so. Syria should specifically and publicly demonstrate its willingness to play a constructive role through positive statements in support of efforts to stabilize and rebuild Iraq. Asad insisted that Syria was

doing what it could on the border and other issues, including Iraqi assets in Syrian banks and said that a US Army team would be visiting "next week" to discuss border security.

15. (C) SUPPORTING PEACE EFFORTS: Murphy also suggested that Syria play a more constructive role in support of efforts to achieve regional peace. The signing of a symbolic peace agreement negotiated by former Israeli and Palestinian officials in Geneva on Dec 1 presented an opportunity for the SARG to affirm its commitment to peace. Asad protested that he hadn't read the agreement, and that it had nothing to do with Syria. Murphy rejoined that Syria didn't need to know what was in the text, and didn't have to support it, but it should find a way to applaud the efforts of those who seek peace. This particular agreement might not deal specifically with Syria but it did deal with restoring hope for peace, which did concern Syria. Asad seemed receptive to this notion, though he did not go so far as to agree that he ought to publicly commend such efforts. Indicating one concern underlying his lack of enthusiasm, Asad asked Murphy for his views on what the US government would be doing in the coming year on the peace process. How serious would the US be? Murphy predicted that the USG would stand by the Road Map, but might not offer any further initiatives in the coming months, noting that its expectations had been dampened by Abu Mazen's resignation. But the Road Map wasn't a vision, Asad protested. Perhaps not, Murphy said, but it supported a comprehensive peace and laid out specific, practical requirements to achieve an Israeli/Palestinian settlement.

16. (C) DEALING WITH OBSTACLES: Murphy asked Asad for his view of Hizballah and its intentions vis-a-vis a peace settlement. Hassan Nasrallah, Asad replied, dresses like a religious man, but he is really an excellent politician whose basic interest is building an effective political party in Lebanon. Their interest is in liberating Lebanon, not in attacking Israel. Asad gave no ground on Murphy's point that according to the UN, all of Lebanon's territory had been liberated and that continued insistence that Shaba Farms was part of Lebanon was not consistent with UNSCR 425. Only Lebanon and Syria had the right to say which country owned Sheb, a. Beirut and Damascus agreed it was Lebanese territory. Murphy noted the statements by Hizballah leaders calling for the liberation of Jerusalem. Asad asserted that such statements were rhetorical only and ought not to be taken seriously. Hadn't the Blue Line remained quiet? Why had the Blue Line remained quiet, Murphy queried. Was it due to Syria, Iran or Hizballah's own self-discipline? Asad replied that while Syria supported keeping the Blue Line calm, it was Hizballah's decision. He charged that the Israeli provocations, intended to maintain tension among Israelis, were largely responsible for any incidents that occurred. The IDF overflew Lebanese territory, Hizballah responded with "symbolic gestures" of defense by firing 57mm AAA, and Israelis near the border went into their air shelters.

17. (U) MURAD: Murphy asked the President what progress had been made in locating the abducted children of Mrs. Elizabeth Henry, whose former husband was known to have taken the children from Lebanon to Syria. Asad said he was well aware of the case and that he had instructed his Minister of Interior to personally take charge of the matter. Regrettably, the Syrian authorities did not know where Mr. Murad was. Asad asked whether the USG might not provide additional information to assist the Syrian authorities in their efforts to track down Murad. Murphy said he would convey this request, but urged that the SARG redouble its efforts. It was very difficult to believe that Murad could not be found.

18. (C) COMMENT: This was Ambassador Murphy's second meeting with Asad (the first was in April 2002) who, despite the ongoing crisis in relations, seemed relaxed, focused and confident enough to conduct the entire meeting in English (asking his interpreter for help with just three words).

19. (U) Ambassador Murphy cleared this message.

¶10. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

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